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BRENDA LANE-WORTHINGTON

Breakfast of champions

Visitors at the bar in East Oakland noticed something peculiar about this woman right from the beginning.

Here she was, the daughter of a domestic from New Iberia, Louisiana — of all places. But her diction was distinct and clear, without a regional accent. It was as though she'd just stepped out of a schoolroom, helping an English teacher grade papers.

She was a barmaid trying to support five kids on the nickels and dimes flung across the scratched tables.

But when Esther Clay strutted over to get



Tribune photo by Robert Stinnett

Lady Esther cooks up a storm.

that tip, you took notice. She had a way of walking that could make an empress look sloppy.

There's no way of dodging it — folks called Esther "uppity" ... all except one customer. He called her "Lady."

"That's what you are, you know," he told her. "And if you ever open your own place, that's just what you should call it — Lady Esther's."

The name stuck.

Today Esther Clay spends a lot of time in a T-shirt, in the kitchen of her East 14th Street restaurant. But after 13 years in the business, folks still call her "Lady."

It seems she has earned the title. Does her food breed champions?

Ask singers Marvin Gaye, and Stevie Wonder, actress Esther Rolle, and author J.

food breed champions?

Ask singers Marvin Gaye, and Stevie Wonder, actress Esther Rolle, and author James Baldwin. Then, if you can catch up with them, mention her name to sports figures Monte Jackson, Kenny King, Charles Phillips, Henry Lawrence, John Lucas, Clifford Ray, and Joe Barry Carroll. And if you doubt them, ask Tribune columnist Sidney Jones — he's eaten there, too.

But there's nothing lady-like about the food that comes out of this kitchen.

Some say Lady makes the best shrimp omelette this side of the Bayou. But don't ignore her sausage — how it sizzles. Her biscuits float. The steak comes with gravy, and ...

Yes, it's true, this soul food could inspire poetry, but most of her hundreds of diners a week are too busy forking in the huge portions ("I don't know any other way to cook except big") to find time for writing.

Stand near her kitchen for 20 minutes, during a Saturday morning breakfast rush, and watch a portion of her staff of 15 turn out two dozen smoking plates — and that's just take-out.

What makes the place a success? "Even rich men long for simple food," explains the Lady. "It's eating for survival and enjoying it. It's the food my mother and grandmother cooked in the white man's kitchens."

What she doesn't mention, but is true, is that it's also one of East Oakland's finest contributions, a scent-filled niche unaffected by politics and hard times. It's proof, despite any disclaimers, that you can go home again ... if you're willing to settle for Mama's kitchen.

Food that warms the soul

By Paula Hamilton
The Tribune

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Clay, Esther

“WHEN I GET A CRAVING FOR soul food, I go over to Lady E's. She's the only person who cooks like my mother,” says Attorney Rufus Cole of Oakland.

“Lady E's isn't like a nouvelle cuisine restaurant where you can hardly find the food on your plate. They feed you. Who else gives you five side dishes with your entree?”

When KQED publicist Phyllis Brown gets a hankering for the foods she grew up on, she heads over the Bay Bridge to Eli's Mile High Club in Oakland. “They make the best fried chicken.”

Mayors Lionel Wilson of Oakland and Loni Hancock of Berkeley are both regular customers at Lois' (the Pie Queen) restaurant in Oakland.

Lois Davis built her reputation in the early '50s baking sweet potato pies at home to raise money for her father's Ephesian Church. Word spread rapidly and with great support and en-

Black cuisine adds spice to comeback of regional cooking

couragement she opened her first restaurant in 1955.

Davis has feeding many of the same customers for 32 years. “Now I go into the restaurant and see men I knew as babies. They all call me mother,” she says.

The more successful people become and the more hectic life gets, the more we want to reconnect with our roots. As a result regional cooking is sweeping the country.

“Black cookery is part of that regional comeback,” said Jonell Nash, food editor of Essence magazine in an article in the New York Times.

“Even non-blacks today tend to flock to black cookery (or Southern-style) restaurants because of the earthiness of the foods and the well-defined flavors.”

More than describing a menu, the term “soul food” reflects an attitude.

To Davis, “Soul food is food in which you've put your whole heart and soul to prepare.”

Clay agrees. “What is soul? It's the preparations and vibrations you use when you cook. It's the seasoning. It's the most unique food in America.”

“Historically it's the food derived from slaves. Cornmeal, molasses, variety meats. Black people can turn anything into good tasting food,” his mother adds.

Locally, people are jamming soulfood restaurants such as Lady E's, Lois' (The Pie Queen), Eli's Mile High Club as well as Choyce's Restaurant in Berkeley, Soul Brothers Kitchen and The Barn, both in Oakland.

“When we first opened our clientele was 70

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percent black. Today it's 50 to 60 percent Caucasian," says Lois Davis' son, Chris. He runs the restaurant on a daily basis. His mother still bakes all the biscuits and desserts (except for the three-layer coconut cakes, which are made by a neighbor) and cooks on weekends.

On the other side of town is Lady E's at 5237 East 14th St. Owner Esther Clay, a cocktail waitress and manager of the old Pacific Bowling Alley Restaurant, before opening her first restaurant almost 20 years ago, says, "We have many Caucasian customers. Especially now during Black History Month, we're seeing many new white faces."

Soul food is the kind of cooking grandmothers teach their daughters who in turn teach their daughters. Very rarely are recipes written down. Davis, in fact, doesn't even have a recipe.

Felecia Gaston, author of "Gaston's Guide: The Authoritative Ethnic Guide," defines soul food this way: "Soul food is a cuisine derived from the period after black people were brought from Africa to the United States.

The creative blend of vegetables, meats and various spices was based on need, economics and survival of the family unit. Many of the items used were throwaways and the scant food had to stretch a long way to feed many people. Soul food is spiritual, gives you a warm feeling and is prepared with plenty of love and prayer."

It's the smells and tastes of peach cobbler, black-eyed peas, spicy cabbage and beans, candied yams, creamy grits, fork-tender shortribs, crisply fried chicken, homemade biscuits and cornbread muffins?

And soul food is variety meats. "When Johnny Cash is in town I rush over orders of chit-

terlings to him. He loves them," says Clay. Chitterlings are a specialty every Friday and Saturday at Lady E's.

It's also a cuisine that's received its share of criticism for being high in fat and high in salt.

Clay, who feeds the likes of Patty LaBelle, Luther Vandross and Diana Ross and most black athletes when they're in town, doesn't agree with that criticism. "We don't use oil in anything. We also use ham shanks, instead of ham hocks, because they contain less fat. If someone prefers their food less spicy, we can make it less spicy."

Davis says, "Even though I like a lot of salt, I don't cook with it. My soul food is never highly seasoned. I also don't cook with a lot of grease. My plates are nice and neat."

Health conscious black food editors, such as Nash, are revamping traditional recipes to cut back on fat and salt. "For example, leafy greens — mustard, collards and turnips as well as cabbage — are very nutritious, but we're trying to show people how to use smoked turkey parts and herbs instead of pork fatback or ham hocks to cut back on salt and fat."

According to Gaston, who is currently working on the third edition of her restaurant guide, the food has stayed the same but the restaurants themselves have changed. "Since 1984 I've noticed that soul food restaurants are placing more attention on atmosphere and on providing good service."

Clay moved here from New Iberia, La., in 1963. "People in the South always ate at home. That why all soul food restaurants have a warm, soft feeling like someone's house. You'll always meet someone interesting."

Services today for popular cook

Esther Clay nurtured varied clientele, all parts of Oakland

FRI JUL - 5 1991

By Bill Snyder
Tribune staff writer

Services will be held today for "Lady" Esther Clay, a soul food cook whose legendary East Oakland restaurant was both hangout and home away from home for football players and musicians.

Ms. Clay died Monday at Merritt-Peralta Hospital after a long struggle against cancer. She was 53.

"She fed the homeless, she fed the stars. It was always open house at Lady E's," said Johnny Lorigo, a friend and one-time maitre'd at Ms. Clay's restaurant on East 14th Street.

Born in Belle Place, Louisiana, Ms. Clay first worked as a waitress when she arrived in Oakland in 1962, a young mother with five children to support.

By 1967 she had opened a restaurant, first called Lady Esther's, and had started to attract hungry clients from all sections of Oakland.

'She fed the homeless, she fed the stars. It was always open house at Lady E's.'

— Johnny Lorigo,
one-time maitre'd

Along with her skill at the stove, there was a generous heart and an impressive dignity, friends said. Writing about her in 1980, a Tribune columnist described Ms. Clay this way: "She had a way of walking that made an empress look sloppy."

Shrimp omelettes, biscuits with gravy, steak and sausage were just some of the items on her menu.

Asked to describe what made her

restaurant, eventually called Lady E's, Ms. Clay said: "Even rich men long for simple food. It's eating for survival and enjoying it. It's the food my mother and grandmother cooked in the white man's kitchens."

Friends said that her restaurant was so popular with the Oakland Raiders that the team's owner, Al Davis, tried to get her to move south when he took the football team to Los Angeles. She was tempted, they said, but leaving Oakland was more than she could bear.

Ms. Clay retired a few years ago, and her restaurant, which is still run by family members, is now called The Southern Cafe.

She is survived by five children; daughters Deimentrius Smith, Deiadra Carter and Maralena Clay and sons James Clay and DeWayne Clay.

The service is at 1 p.m. at the Chapel of the Chimes Mortuary, 4499 Piedmont Ave.